Khachaturian, a Leading Soviet Composer, Dies at 74: Works Included ...
New York Times (1923-Current file); May 3, 1978; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times
pg. B2

Khachaturian, a Leading Soviet Composer, Dies at 74

Blocked due to copyright. See full page image or microfilm.

Tass/Sovfoto

Aram Khachaturian conducting his own music in Moscow in 1972

Blocked due to copyright. See full page image or microfilm.

©1954 by G. Schirmer Inc. By permission

Excerpt from the "Saber Dance" from the ballet "Gayne," one of Mr. Khachaturian's best-known works. Piano reduction is by Henry Levine.

Aram Khachaturian, the Soviet composer of the brassy "Saber Dance" and other pieces inspired by the vital rhythms of his native Caucasus, died Monday. He was 74 years old.

Mr. Khachaturian, whose popular appeal, folk-oriented style and unwavering adherence to the Communist Party line in the arts here, had suffered from a "grave and lasting illness," according to Tass, the Soviet press agency.

He was a prolific composer of symphonies, concertos, chamber music, film scores, incidental music and ballets, but his international popularity derived chiefly from his music for one ballet, "Gayne," which included the "Saber Dance," an American juke-box hit more than a quarter of a century ago.

The Armenian composer never disowned the "Saber Dance," but he did feel, apparently, that it deflected attention from his other works. "It's like one button on my shirt, and I have many buttons," he once told an American interviewer. Nevertheless, when he appeared as guest conductor of several orchestras in the United States in 1968, he used it as an encore for his concerts.

Mr. Khachaturian's style was melodious, with strong rhythms, colorful orchestration and a conservative harmonic vocabulary. Inspired by the folk music of Armenia and neighboring regions, his works were a continuation of the picturesque 19th-century nationalism of the Russian "mighty five"—Balakirev, Borodin, Cui, Mussorgsky and Rimsky-Korsakov.

Almost from the outset of his career, Mr. Khachaturian immersed himself in political activity and soon became a powerful figure in Soviet music. In 1937, the year he left the Moscow Conservatory, he was elected deputy chairman of the Moscow Department of the Union of Composers. From 1939 to 1948, he was deputy chairman of the Organization Committee of the Union of Composers. His name was inscribed in marble on the Moscow Conservatory's honors board, alongside those of Rachmaninoff and Scriabin.

Works Included 'Masquerade' Suite

But Mr. Khachaturian's artistic achievements were less impressive than the popularity that accrued. He conducted the National Symphony of Washngton in a concert of his works at Philharmonic Hall on Jan. 28, 1968, and in a review of the event in The New York Times, Harold C. Schonberg wrote that Mr. Khachaturian was "at his best a minor figure and his music these days has little to offer."

In addition to "Gayne," his list of better-known works includes the Piano Concerto (1936), Violin Concerto (1940), "Masquerade" Suite (1944) and the ballet "Spartacus" (1953).

Mr. Khachaturian's reputation began to grow in 1937 when he composed a choral chestration and a conservative harmonic soon incorporated into a larger symphonic work, "Poem About Stalin."

Fall From Grace in 1948

A few years later, he was awarded the Stalin Prize of 100,000 rubles for "Gayne" (1942), and eventually he achieved official eminence as chairman of the Union of Soviet Composers.

In 1948, came a spectacular fall from grace when, along with Serge Prokofiev and Dmitri Shostakovich, he was denounced by the Central Committee of the Communist Party for having written undemocratic compositions. The committee declared that the works of all three composers "smell strongly of the spirit of modern bourgeois culture, the complete denial of musical art."

Like Prokofiev and Shostakovich, Mr. Khachaturian hastened to confess his musical guilt, declaring that he recognized his own errors and was grateful to have them pointed out.

His works of the next years had a mixed critical reaction. His music for the film "The Battle of Stalingrad" (1949) received a Stalin Prize, but the "Overture-Poem" (1950) was criticized for its "forms of artificiality," regarded as a grave stricture.

Mellowing of Attitude

After Stalin's death, however, the official Soviet attitude on musical style appeared to mellow somewhat, and in 1953, Mr. Khachaturian published an article in the periodical Soviet Music that seemed to repudiate the 1948 denunciations. Subsequently, he and Soviet spokesmen denied that an attack on the denunciations had been intended. The spirit of the article had been clear enough, however, and it seemed equally clear that it had been approved before publication by the authorities.

In 1954, he received the title of Artist of the Soviet Union, and apparently had no further difficulties with the Government. He was given an apartment in a Moscow building where Shostakovich and Mstislav Rostropovich lived, and the Armenian Government gave him an estate with servants and chauffeured automobiles.

"I suppose that makes me a capitalist," he once said while discussing his material advantages during his conducting tour here.

Left Georgia for Moscow

Mr. Khachaturian was born June 6, 1903, the son of an Armenian bookbinder in Tiflis, now Tbilisi, the capital of Soviet Georgia. Aram's involvement with music began at the age of 8, when his parents bought a piano from the former tenant of their new apartment. He became a student at a boarding school run by a Russian princess who was a customer of his father. In later years, he played first tuba in a secondary school's brass band.

Leaving Georgia, he went to Moscow with a band of traveling actors, writing songs for the group's plays. But, as he said many years later in an interview, "I was a student of physics and mathematics until I was 19." He did not hear his first symphony concert until he was enrolled in the Gnessin Music School, where he remained until 1929. He entered the Moscow Conservatory in 1930 and studied composition with Nikolai Miaskovsky.

The young composer's first taste of public attention came a couple of years later when Prokofiev visited the conservatory, heard a piano trio by Mr. Khachaturian and chose the work for performance.

Mr. Khachaturian's wife was Nine Makarova, who was also professional composer, and they had a son, Karin, born in 1942, who became an actor. He accompanied his parents here on their tour in 1968; at that time he was associated with the Moscow Satire Theater.

In recent decades, Mr. Khachaturian traveled extensively outside the Soviet Union, conducting concerts in the United States, Sweden, Britain and Italy. He suffered a heart attack in October 1965, but three years later he made his first tour of the United States, conducting, besides the "Saber Dance," his Concert-Rhapsody for Cello and Orchestra and music from "Spartacus."

During his visit to New York, he explained to an interviewer the workings of the Union of Soviet Composers. He said, "Soviet composers write what they want, when they want," and had always been free to do so in the Soviet Union. "Moscow alone has about 500 members" he added, "and in the entire Soviet Union there are about 2,500. Anybody, no matter how high, can have his opinion. We meet every day and criticize each other as comrades. Very often they open my eyes." But, he said, "They can't force you not to write."